

# Stoneman, Maxwell

## Classical Crossroads:

### Searching for Common Ground between Pop and Classical Music

Faculty Mentor: Professor Michael Hicks, School of Music

Since the early 1980s, a trend has been observed in the demography of those who attend arts events across the United States. There was been a noticeable “graying” of this group, meaning their average age has steadily increased for several decades and now appears endemic throughout the United States. Meanwhile, popular music has begun to reach further and further into adolescence and infancy to expand its market, delineating very clearly that new music is the best music. These two trends have created a seemingly insurmountable divide between popular music (which is king on FM radio and television) and classical music (heard generally on subscription radio, public radio and at orchestral venues).

As distinct and exclusive as each camp may appear, the purpose of Classical Crossroads radio program was to explore and expose the deep, enduring connections that run through classical music and infiltrate even the furthest removed popular music. A prime example<sup>1</sup> is the song “American Tune” by Paul Simon (this topic is discussed with greater detail in an edition of Classical Crossroads).

In 1973, there was no doubt as to Simon’s popular appeal. By that time in his career (solo and teamed with Art Garfunkel), he had sold millions of albums, toured extensively within the US and had received two Grammys for his work. But Simon had earned such sound pop credentials by evoking early music of America and Europe. With a new song, titled “American Tune,” he continued further down that vein and used a line from the chorale in Johann Sebastian Bach’s St Matthew Passion, one familiar to American Protestants as the hymnal “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.” The first two lines of each verse are cut whole cloth from these two older works and form the “hook” or highly memorable segment of this pop piece.

But even JS Bach was not above taking the work of a previous composer and utilizing it for his purposes. In his St Matthew Passion chorale, he was actually using the folk dance composed by 16<sup>th</sup> century composer Hans Hassler, whose secular song “Mein Gmüth ist mir verwirret” is the basis for the tune that would eventually be “American Tune.” In this respect, Paul Simon is no different from JS Bach: both men took a lovely choral tune and gave it a prominent place in one of their most popular, critically acclaimed works.

This project served (and yet serves) as a means to facilitate communication and mutual respect for two dominant but diametrically opposed genres. By showcasing the music that composers ancient and modern have shared and played together, those who consider themselves only amenable to either pop or classical have a means to broaden their tastes

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<sup>1</sup> This and other examples used in the production of Classical Crossroads can be provided upon request.

and to respect (even begrudgingly) the marvelous output of so many artists they would otherwise never hear.

My hypothesis in beginning Classical Crossroads was that there is no radio feature currently available that adequately does the job of bringing the best classical to pop ears and the best pop to classical ears. And no feature tries to delve into the perplexing questions involving the definition of pop, its origin, what constitutes a classical “crossover” and in what places are the two genres becoming less and less distinguishable. After a year of research and production, I have found that there are many promising places to search and an appealing method of presentation for classical and pop listeners.

In interviewing and speaking with faculty from the Brigham Young University School of Music and other experts in the field (including a terrific 30-minute interview with Tommy Tallarico, the creator and conductor of the Video Games Live! concert series), I am convinced that there is a void that can be filled with my production Classical Crossroads, which entertains and informs those who listen to pop or classical radio. My research has put me in touch with dozens of interested individuals whose voices would enrich the content of each segment as well as nearly a hundred different recordings of music that is not easily defined, but is certainly worthy of broadcast and discussion.

Originally, my plan was to create an hour-long, in-depth program involving several interviews and extensive musical and audio examples. In consultation with my mentor for the project, Dr Michael Hicks, I have made a more modest assessment of how Classical Crossroads can be utilized for the benefit of Brigham Young University and its production simplified and streamlined.

At this time, Classical 89 (the only classical station in Utah) plays several national programs ranging from 90 seconds to six minutes, each of them dedicated to a certain topic or demographic (i.e. Classics for Kids, Earth & Sky, Composer’s Datebook, etc). My plan is to create a number of 6 – 10 minute features that succinctly deal with one topic (such as Simon’s “American Tune” or a pop hit based upon Pachelbel’s Canon in D). These will be produced in such a way as to respect the sensitivities of a classical audience while keeping in mind the needs of an audience predisposed to a pop format.

These features can then be placed on the public radio exchange PRX. This means any station that belongs to the exchange can download and broadcast the feature, with licensing being reserved for BYU Broadcasting. Ultimately, there will be more than 50 of these features that can be broadcast on a regular, weekly basis year-round.

This project was facilitated by the generous volunteering of equipment and archive music belonging to Classical 89 as well as the personal archive of Dr Luke Howard of the BYU School of Music. My project was somewhat frustrated by the crash of an external hard drive carrying a number of unfinished segments, but the raw audio is still available and the shows can be re-created. In sum, this was a great undertaking whose outcome is very encouraging, especially to those whose love for music bridges the divide of pop and classical.